# Off-highway Vehicles in Nova Scotia

By

Voluntary Planning Task Force on Off-highway Vehicles

October 9th, 2003

## Introduction

The time has arrived, as it has in many other jurisdictions of North America, for Nova Scotians to talk about off-highway vehicles (OHVs). A number of widespread concerns have prompted the provincial government to involve Voluntary Planning and citizens in a discussion that will lead to future policy recommendations.

Voluntary Planning's terms of reference for this policy project calls for citizen input on off-highway vehicle use in Nova Scotia as it relates to a number of key issues of public and government concern.[1] Issues include

- public health and safety;
- liability;
- environmental impacts;
- property rights;
- public and private land use;
- user conflict;
- opportunities for responsible OHV use;

All-terrain vehicles (ATVs) represent the fastest growing segment of OHVs, with an estimated 40,000 ATVs now in use. While most concerns appear to involve ATV use, other types of OHVs pose many of the same challenges, to varying degrees.

Demand for ATVs among North Americans can be attributed to their versatility. People employ these vehicles for

- mobility (of seniors and physically handicapped);
- search and rescue;
- sport/recreation by individuals, families and club members;
- hunting and fishing;
- land management (aids for those with larger lots);
- numerous commercial/industrial tasks;

So what do we need to do to ensure that enthusiasts of these vehicles can pursue their favourite activities, but do so in greatest possible harmony with the values of our society?

Although we will learn from the methods employed in other jurisdictions, what Nova Scotians feel most strongly about—our values—will, in large part, determine what happens to improve public and user safety, protect our environment, and curb irresponsible/illegal use. The expression of our values as citizens will define our collective vision for the future.

Nova Scotia's current policies and practices provide an inadequate foundation from which to manage the current level of activity, let alone accommodate future growth.

It is believed that a small minority of users is responsible for most of the more serious offences. This minority takes advantage of lax rules and enforcement. The law-abiding majority may readily accept new ground rules, if they make sense and we communicate them effectively.

We will be asking a number of very difficult questions of Nova Scotians in the months to come. Our recommendations may affect who gets to operate OHVs, where they get to operate them, and how they are operated. Please share your views with us so that we may make recommendations that best serve Nova Scotians.

## About Voluntary Planning

Also known as "Nova Scotia's Citizens' Policy Forum," this 40-year-old organization excels at mobilizing volunteers to research an issue, consult with other Nova Scotians, and provide advice to the Government of Nova Scotia on the best course of action to take.

Voluntary Planning is unique. Nothing like it exists, to our knowledge, in all of North America. This is a credit to successive provincial governments which have seen the wisdom of collaborating with community, labour, and business leaders on policy development using the Voluntary Planning process.

Government's support of Voluntary Planning acknowledges the value of engaging citizens in a dialogue on important issues before major policy decisions are made.

Voluntary Planning operates at arm's length from government. Although the province funds us, we view both government and citizens as our clients. We report, on behalf of citizens, to the premier and cabinet through our relationship with the policy centre of government, Treasury and Policy Board.

Our board of directors, and about 100 members, formulate policy advice based on the long-term best interest of the entire province. We are not aligned with any political party. While our members may have connections to corporations, unions, or other organizations, they do not speak on behalf of, or represent, these entities in their work with Voluntary Planning.

In accepting the off-highway vehicle project from government, Voluntary Planning's board of directors committed to:

- assemble a diverse task force of qualified and credible volunteers;
- consult with Nova Scotians by hosting community hall meetings and receiving input in a variety of other formats;
- research off-highway vehicle use in other jurisdictions;
- submit a final report before March 31, 2004.

The Off-highway Vehicle Task Force will issue an interim report, well in advance of our final report, to give Nova Scotians a chance to tell us whether we have got it right. Our reports will be made public on the same day that they are given to government and the opposition parties.

## In Search of Solutions

The people on the Off-highway Vehicle Task Force do not know all the issues, nor how strongly Nova Scotians feel about them. But we intend to find out. And while the task force will eventually make very strong and clear recommendations, we are starting off with no pre-conceived positions.

By releasing this discussion paper, it is our intention to present an objective overview, while attempting to share with the reader as much of the relevant information as possible. We do not intend to influence the opinion of those we hope to hear from in our upcoming consultations.

**We need to hear what you think about off-highway vehicles**—both the good and the bad. We are in search of solutions to real problems. So let us know what is important to you, but also take time to tell us what you think is needed for your vision to be realized. We want to know your thoughts, opinions, answers, and solutions to the following questions. We have provided some introductory information and statistics as a starting point in the sections that follow.

**Question 1:** What types of vehicles need to be addressed by laws and regulation through the Off-highway Vehicles Act?

**Question 2:** Do different classes of OHVs require different treatment under the act? (E.g., snowmobile versus ATVs)

**Question 3:** What can be done about the low percentage of off-highway vehicles legally registered in Nova Scotia?

**Question 4:** Should Nova Scotia change the rules for the operation of off-highway vehicles by children and, if so, how?

**Question 5:** What should be done to prevent injury and death among enthusiasts of off-highway vehicles?

**Question 6:** What level of OHV access should be authorized in protected wilderness areas?

**Question 7:** Should provincial Crown lands be (a) open to unrestricted off-highway vehicle use, (b) open with control and restrictions in problem areas only, or (c) generally closed with only specific, identified areas open to use?

**Question 8:** What measures, in relation to OHVs, are needed to protect and enhance Nova Scotia's natural environment?

**Question 9:** What can Nova Scotia do to further benefit from the economic potential presented to us given that so many people wish to enjoy the outdoors using OHVs?

**Question 10:** What can be done about unauthorized travel, and trail development, on private land by OHV users?

**Question 11:** In what situations should trails accommodate both motorized and non-motorized users? In what situations should this not be considered?

**Question 12:** Is the current level of enforcement sufficient to maintain order amo ng the OHV community and, if not, what should be done and who should pay?

**Question 13:** What changes, if any, are required to laws affecting OHVs?

## What Is an Off-highwayVehicle?

Nova Scotia's Off-highway Vehicles Act currently defines an OHV as a snow vehicle, a three-wheel or four-wheel all-terrain vehicle, a motorcycle, a mini bike, a four-wheel-drive or low-tire-pressure vehicle, a dune buggy, or a vehicle or class of vehicle designated as an off-highway vehicle by regulation.[2]

The act does not include vehicles registered under the Motor Vehicle Act. This clause of the act exempts any vehicle licensed for highway use, even if it is capable of, and used for, off-road travel. Examples of this class of vehicle include stock and modified Jeeps, pickup trucks, and sport utility vehicles (SUV).[3]

Also exempt, under the same logic, is any form of motorcycle capable of off-highway travel but registered under the Motor Vehicle Act.

Other motorized and non-motorized vehicles and vessels used off-road in Nova Scotia for recreational purposes include motorboats, personal watercraft, aircraft (floatplanes), and mountain bikes. A briefing note from the Canadian Coast Guard says, "Thus, in general, the federal government has the exclusive jurisdiction to regulate boating on the surface of all Canadian waters, including inland lakes and rivers. Provinces can regulate what occurs at the shoreline..."[4]

So, primarily because of jurisdictional issues, our OHV Task Force does not plan to deal with boats or personal watercraft. And we do not anticipate the need to spend much time talking about airplanes or mountain bikes.

Under the act, all OHVs must be registered. According to the provincial government, following are the number of legally registered OHVs in Nova Scotia (2003):

| | |
|---|---|
| All Terrain Vehicles: | 23, 291 |
| Snow Vehicles: | 5,068 |
| Motorcycles: | 331 |
| Other | 240. |

These figures represent only registered vehicles. It is suspected that thousands of OHVs are not registered.

Referring to questions 1, 2 and 3:

**Question 1:** What types of vehicles need to be addressed by laws and regulation through the Off-highway Vehicles Act?

**Question 2:** Do different classes of OHVs require different treatment under the act? (E.g., snowmobile versus ATVs)

**Question 3:** What can be done about the low percentage of off-highway vehicles legally registered in Nova Scotia?

## Public Health and Safety

According to the Canadian Institute of Health Information the number of ATV-related hospitalizations in Canada has increased by almost 50 per cent in the past five years. And children between the ages of 5 and 19 accounted for more than one third of all ATV-related injuries.[5]

In the USA, 4,500 adults and children were killed on ATVs between 1982 and 2001. Thirty-eight per cent of those killed were less than 16 years of age, and of these 47 per cent were less than 12 years of age.[6]

The Nova Scotia Safety Council Position Statement on ATVs notes that two adults, and three children ages 13 and under were killed in Nova Scotia in ATV-related incidents between January and September 2002.[7] In the past two years, ten people have been killed in Nova Scotia in ATV incidents.[8] Many more people are hospitalized, visit emergency departments, and find their way into primary care settings.

In addition to the worry and grief, the dollar costs of OHV related injuries are extremely high. They include the short- and long-term costs of treating injuries, the lost time at school or work, and the lost years of opportunity when a person dies prematurely.

Injury is the leading cause of death for Nova Scotians during the first 45 years of life.[9] And because it is widely recognized that many injuries are preventable, the Nova Scotia government has committed to developing a provincial injury prevention strategy.[10] Finding ways to curb OHV injuries would certainly make a positive contribution to that effort.

OHVs are powerful. They can weigh more than 700 pounds and can reach speeds of more than 100 km per hour. They require strength, weight, and coordination for proper control.

Machines are now being designed for smaller and/or younger riders. Young children lack strength. They also lack perception of speed and depth to the degree that may be required to safely handle these machines.[11]

Nova Scotia's Off-highway Vehicles Act and Regulations contain the following measures to improve safety:

- Helmets are required for both drivers and passengers;

- For persons between ages 10 and 14 (no conditions for ages 14 and over), an OHV may be operated: or
  on property of parent/guardian or land where permission is granted;
  directly supervised by a person at least the age of majority;

- For persons under 10, OHVs may be operated:
  on property of parent/guardian or land where permission is granted; and
  if directly supervised by a person at least the age of majority;

- Prohibited areas are:
  upon a highway;
  upon a shoulder of the highway;
  upon a median of a highway;

- Driving across highway is permitted at right angles if the driver:
  Has no passengers;
  stops and yields to traffic;
  holds a valid driver's licence;
  has 500 feet of unobstructed view in both directions;

- Operators may travel in a highway ditch:
  with or against the flow of traffic during daylight hours;
  with flow of traffic only from sunset to sunrise;

- Lamps are required from sunset to sunrise:
  on front, at least one lighted lamp;
  on rear, at least one red light;

- No person shall operate an OHV
  without due care and attention;
  without reasonable consideration for other persons, including passengers, or property;
  at an excessive rate of speed having regard for the conditions existing at the time;
  so as to annoy or worry a domestic or farm animal or wildlife.

There is no mention of safety training in the act.

Referring to questions 4 and 5

**Question 4:** Should Nova Scotia change the rules for the operation of off-highway vehicles by children and, if so, how?

**Question 5:** What should be done to prevent injury and death among enthusiasts of off-highway vehicles?

## The Great Outdoors: Playground and Precious Habitat

Challenging questions arise when Nova Scotians discuss the right of off-highway vehicle enthusiasts to enjoy their machines on private and public lands, and the need to protect our environment and the plants, animals and wildlife habitats of this province, endangered or otherwise.

Besides being important to our Department of Environment and Labour and Department of Natural Resources - the quality of our environment is important to our tourism industry. The Department of Tourism and Culture writes, "environmental integrity is also a pillar of our Tourism Development Plan and central to Nova Scotia's global market-positioning as a scenic nature tourism destination." [12]

In a recent media interview the president of the Tourism Industry Association of Nova Scotia, Mr. Nick Carson, advised Tourism Minister Rodney MacDonald that, "Government has to protect and preserve the scenery and the countryside, the beauty that is Nova Scotia... there are 50 million people within a two hour flight of this wonderful destination ... we've got to protect what we have in order to get them to come and visit us."[13]

The purchase and outfitting of OHVs by Nova Scotians whether for industry or recreation has a positive impact on our economy.

The Snowmobile Association of Nova Scotia represents over 5000 snowmobilers. The association estimates that each member spends about $4000 per year on their sport.[14] The All Terrain Vehicle Association of Nova Scotia represents approximately 1200 members with many thousands more not belonging to clubs.[15] Each of these operators would spend considerable dollars during the run of a year.

Off-highway enthusiasts and those who use the vehicles for commercial or industrial purposes spend money beyond the initial purchase price which for a high-end ATV can be upwards of $10,000 per unit. Much of this spending goes to support business located in our more rural regions. Other spending includes:

- helmets and protective clothing;
- electronics, such as GPS machines;
- all sorts of add-on apparatus for increased functionality;
- gas;
- servicing;
- trucks, trailers;
- hotels, campgrounds;
- food, drink, and restaurant;
- additional hunting and fishing supplies;
- fees for rallies and other events;

In order to balance this picture, almost by definition, off-highway vehicles have some affect on the environment representing a cost to our society. This can be true despite the fact that responsible off-highway vehicle users pursue their recreation with respect for the environment.

The detrimental environmental effects attributed to off-highway vehicle use include that users:

- injure or kill rare or endangered species;
- disturb or destroy sensitive habitats;
- damage wetlands;
- alter watercourses;
- remove surface vegetation;
- cause tourists to have a negative visitor experience because of noise, pollution and damage to scenery;
- increase sediments in fish habitats and drinking water supplies;
- transport alien species of vegetation;
- damage soil through compaction and erosion;
- pollute with residues from fuel, engine oil, transmission fluids, gear grease, and other lubricants;
- pollute with noise;
- create aesthetically unpleasing scarring of terrain;
- litter;
- increase pressure on hunting and fishing stocks by using OHVs to access new territory.

With such potential for impact, it's no wonder that Nova Scotians don't always agree on where off-highway vehicles should be welcomed. The statistics below show the majority of land in Nova Scotia is held by the private sector in relatively small lot sizes. [16]

| | | Total |
|---|---|---|
| **Private:** | | |
| • Small acreages (less than 200 acres) | 50% | |
| • Large acreages | 18.7% | 68.7% |
| **Government:** | | |
| • Federal Crown | 3.0% | |
| • Provincial Crown | 23.1% | |
| • Wilderness Areas | 5.2% | 31.3% |

The Province of Nova Scotia does not limit access by OHVs on Crown land, with a few notable exceptions [17]

- OHVs are not permitted in provincial parks under the Parks Act, nor are they allowed in the Shubenacadie Wildlife Sanctuary (specific limited exceptions exist) under the Wildlife Act.
- OHVs are also not permitted on beaches below the mean high water mark (specific limited exceptions exist). Those beaches designated under the Beaches Act may have additional restrictions.
- The Nova Scotia Department of Tourism and Culture has a mandate for protecting and preserving important archaeological, historical, and palaeontological sites and remains.
- The Nova Scotia Department of Environment and Labour is responsible for designated nature reserves which are protected under the Special Places Protection Act, and wilderness areas which are protected under the Wilderness Areas Protection Act. Nature reserves are provided a high level of protection for unique features and

sensitive ecosystems, and as such vehicle use in these areas is prohibited. While vehicle use in wilderness areas is generally prohibited, vehicle access may be authorized in specific circumstances.

Advocates of keeping OHVs out of wilderness areas say this excludes approximately 5 percent of the land area from access. They point out that ample opportunities can, and should, be found on other private and Crown lands.

However, private landowners (large and small) control almost 70 per cent of the land area in Nova Scotia and are under no obligation to allow OHVs on their property. And the Off-highway Vehicles Act says that, "no person shall operate an off-highway vehicle on a sidewalk, walkway, school grounds, utility service lane, cultivated land, private forest land, watercourse, campground, golf course, park, playground, beach, sand dune or any private property, without the permission of the owner or occupier (specific limited exceptions exist)."

Responsible OHV users ask landowners for permission before riding, and respect the decision. But while one landowner may permit the activity, the abutting landowner very well may not—and that's the end of the trail. Or is it?

Trespass is a serious issue being experienced by private landowners throughout the province. In these cases, those making the trouble will apparently not take no for an answer.

Larger woodlot owners appear to have their hands full with OHVs as well. Some, like David Barrett of Barrett Lumber in Halifax County, have made concerted efforts to manage access to company property for the benefit of all. His goal is to have as many people as possible enjoy the outdoors by having them sign-on to a land stewardship approach to recreation.

Landowners worry about vandalism. Moreover, they have concerns about legal issues related to their liability, should people be injured on their land. They wonder how the granting of access might somehow imply a long term "right of use." They also factor in the headaches of managing access day to day. All things considered, many landowners do the opposite of Mr. Barrett—they just say no. And another quality outdoor recreational opportunity is lost to responsible OHV users.

Referring to questions 6,7,8,9, and 10

**Question 6:** What level of OHV access should be authorized in Protected Wilderness Areas?

**Question 7:** Should provincial Crown lands be (a) open to unrestricted off-highway vehicle use, (b) open with control and restrictions in problem areas only, or (c) generally closed with only specific, identified areas open to use?

**Question 8:** What measures, in relation to OHVs, are needed to protect and enhance Nova Scotia's natural environment?

**Question 9:** What can Nova Scotia do to further benefit from the economic potential presented to us given that so many people wish to enjoy the outdoors using OHVs?

**Question 10:** What can be done about unauthorized travel, and trail development, on private land by OHV users?

## Trail Use Conflicts: Multiple Users and Adjacent Residents

Many of the complaints received by local and provincial politicians relating to OHVs involve the inability of non-motorized and motorized trail users to co-exist peacefully in the outdoors. While enthusiasts of off-highway vehicles like nothing better than taking to the trails, many non-machine people do not appreciate the sound of an internal combustion engine piercing the tranquility of their experience.

The Crown owns approximately 1,300 kilometres of abandoned rail corridor lands, acquired and administered according to "A Provincial Policy for Rails to Trails in Nova Scotia." [17] Sections of these rail corridors are made available for community recreational trail development.

Owners of adjacent properties are often frustrated with motorized traffic, particularly when trail corridors pass close to their residences. They complain about the noise occurring at all times of day and night, and fear the criminal element in our society who find the network of trails an ideal haven for their activities.

Many of these concerns may be addressed when a section of an abandoned rail corridor is converted into a trail and actively managed by a community group or club.

The Snowmobile Association of Nova Scotia (SANS) and the All Terrain Vehicle Association (ATVANS) are not able to share the same groomed snowmobile trail because ATV traffic damages the trail, making conditions dangerous for snowmobilers. In some cases, ATVs have been permitted access to SANS routes during the spring and summer months.

For cross-country skiers, sharing trails with off-highway vehicles ranks as a potentially dangerous activity because of the skier's difficulty in making immediate corrections to speed or course. Ruts created by OHVs can make the going difficult for skiers and hikers.

Referring to question 11

**Question 11:** In what situations should trails accommodate both motorized and non-motorized users? In what situations should this not be considered?

## Maintaining Order: Enforcing the Law

Eastern Woods and Water Magazine recently contained an article by Mark Hamilton who noted that, "Enforcement on the Island (PEI) is in much the same state as it is in Nova Scotia: both RCMP and conservation officers enforce the Off-highway Vehicles Act, but neither is specifically mandated to do so. Little time or money is directed to operations aimed at ATVs. More likely, officers who are working on other things—such as environmental offences or transportation-related issues—will deal with ATV riders in the course of those duties..."[18]

Enforcement staff of the Department of Natural Resources, the RCMP, and local police forces across Nova Scotia wrestle with situations every month whereby OHV enthusiasts break the law in their pursuit of fun.

Nova Scotia Department of Natural Resources field officers primarily deal with situations related to parks and trails, protected areas, beaches, endangered species, environmental damage, and wildlife harassment. [20]

The Halifax Detachment of the RCMP receives up to 250 complaints about OHVs (primarily ATVs) in a typical three-month period. The most common of these include: [19]

- illegal operation on roads/highways;
- private property infractions;
- registration;
- helmet use;

- noise complaints;

A number of pieces of legislation establish the legal framework for enforcement officers. It's possible that more than one of these Acts or their regulations will require changes to properly address the new reality of a rapidly expanding and evolving OHV population.

- Off-highway Vehicles Act
- Beaches Act
- Wildlife Act
- Forest Act
- Crown Lands Act
- Parks Act
- Endangered Species Act
- Environment Act
- Trails Act
- Fisheries and Coastal Resources Act
- Liquor Control Act
- Wilderness Areas Protection Act
- Special Places Protection Act
- Protection of Private Property Act.

The Off-highway Vehicles Act serves as the primary tool for the regulation of this activity. Its regulations enable enforcement officers to issue summary offence tickets for many sections of the Act.[20] A Summary Offence Ticket gives the person committing the infraction the opportunity, should they choose, to pay a fine on or before a specified date. They can avoid having to appear in court by paying an out of court settlement ranging in cost from $128.75 to $215.00.

For example:

| | |
|---|---|
| • Operating off-highway vehicle without permit | $157.50 |
| • Failing to wear a helmet as required | $128.75 |
| • Failing to stop on direction of peace officer | $157.50 |
| • Making a false statement in application | $215.00. |

Where an act or section of an act has no provision for summary offence tickets, a person can be charged by an officer issuing a summons requiring the offender to appear in court. Summary Offence Tickets also allow for mandatory court appearance, by not stating a fine in the allocated space on the ticket. This is used for repeat offenders and/or cases where a higher fine is being requested.

In situations where the officer feels the offence will be repeated if the offender is allowed to continue on his/her way, the machine can be impounded for a period not to exceed 24 hours. If the officer can't acquire the information needed to prepare a summons, it is possible to detain the person as well.

Enforcement officers appear limited in other ways as well. Some do not have any off-highway vehicles for their officers to use. Others have the machines but no budget to put officers on the machines. And when machines and officers are available, people just do not co-operate. Lawbreakers have come to understand that, for safety reasons, enforcement officers do not engage in high-speed pursuit on OHVs, particularly ATVs.

Snowmobile and ATV clubs across Nova Scotia are beginning to help. For example, Citizens on Patrol Off Road Lunenburg County is a partnership between the Central Nova ATV Club, the Lunenburg County Crime Prevention Board, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Lunenburg County Detachment. [23]

While they have no official police powers, the Citizens on Patrol Off Road members contribute by acting as extra eyes and ears for the police.

Referring to questions 12 and 13

**Question 12:** Is the current level of enforcement sufficient to maintain order among the OHV community and, if not, what should be done and who should pay?

**Question 13:** What changes, if any, are required to laws affecting OHVs?

## Government Working Group Paper

A provincial government Off-highway Vehicle Working Group has prepared a paper entitled "Strategies to Promote the Responsible Use of Off-Highway Vehicles in Nova Scotia."

This paper is ***not*** the adopted position of the provincial government, nor that of the Voluntary Planning OHV Task Force. Rather, it represents the professional opinion of a number of government officials who met several times to consider the issues and identify possible strategies.

Voluntary Planning will consider these strategies in the broader context of their consultation with citizens and stakeholders during the next several months. We will make this paper available on our Web site, at community meetings, and by request.

Voluntary Planning does not work in isolation from professionals in the provincial government. A team, representing 10 departments and agencies has been assembled to:

- identify and provide a summary of existing provincial government legislation and programs relating to OHV;
- conduct research and review and report on best practice approaches;
- provide background information and advice as requested;

## Get Involved

This is a great opportunity to get involved and make a difference in how the future of Nova Scotia unfolds. Visit our Web site or contact us directly to find :

- a complete time line for the project;
- dates and places for community meetings;
- background information on the task force members;
- relevant material on OHV use;
- more about Voluntary Planning.

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